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ABSTRACT

A study examined the social status of the members of the social sets of preschool children. For 8 weeks, interactions of 3- and 4-year-olds were observed in 8 classrooms. Interaction scores were standardized, and members of each social set were identified as popular, average, or unpopular. Findings indicated that for 3- and 4-year-olds, 39% and 47% respectively of the social sets consisted of same-status peers. The majority of social sets consisted of similar status peers. A total of 9.1% of the social sets consisted of low social status peers only, with 76.5% of the unpopular children being in social sets with higher status peers. Similarity of social status within social sets tended to increase with age. Thus, subsystems based on social status may begin to emerge in preschool, and provide different socialization experiences for different children. Stability of social status increases with age, as do similarity of social status and cohesiveness within the social sets. Therefore, late preschool may be a critical time for intervention strategies that take into account the social milieu of the child. (RH)

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Social Sets and Social Status in Preschool Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

A history of membership in a subsystem of unpopular peers may lead to a cycle of incompetent behavior and unacceptance. Such subsystems exist in elementary schools, but less is known about preschools. In a previous study social sets based on affiliative ties were identified as meaningful units of social organization. We now examined the nature of the social status of the members of the social sets. For 8 weeks, interactions of 3- and 4-year-olds were observed in 8 classrooms. Interaction scores were standardized and members of each social set were identified as popular, average or unpopular. For 3- and 4-year-olds, 39% and 47% of the social sets, respectively, consisted of same status peers. The majority of social sets consisted of similar status peers. 9.1% of the social sets consisted of low social status peers only, with 76.5% of the unpopular children being in social sets with higher status peers. Similarity of social status within social sets tended to increase with age. Thus, subsystems based on social status may begin to emerge in preschool, providing different socialization experiences for different children. Yet, at this early age, unpopular children are frequently exposed to higher status children. However, stability of social status increases with age, as well as similarity of social status and cohesiveness within the social sets. Therefore, late preschool may be a critical time for intervention strategies which take into account the social milieu of the child.

INTRODUCTION

Significant differences in social skills exist between popular and unpopular children (Dodge et al., 1986; Hartup, 1983; Ladd, 1983; Putallaz & Gottman, 1981). These differences are often displayed in group entry behavior, resulting in low status children being isolated from the group more often than high status children (Putallaz et al. 1981, 1989). However, this basic finding is qualified by several contextual variables, including composition of the group (Putallaz & Wasserman, 1989). In analogue studies, unpopular children had a more difficult time entering popular than unpopular groups (Putallaz & Gottman, 1981). If this process occurs in the natural setting, then unpopular children may become isolated from popular children and therefore lose access to good social role models. Recently, Putallaz and Wasserman (1989) found evidence of this process in elementary schools. Also, in elementary schools, Ladd (1983) noted the existence of subsystems of popular, average and unpopular children. Socialization within a subsystem of unpopular peers may perpetuate the incompetence of an unpopular child (Ladd, 1983).

The purpose of the present study was to extend these findings to preschool groups. Previously, social sets based on affiliative ties were identified as meaningful units of social organization in preschool classes (Vespo & Park, 1987). We now examined the nature of the social status of the members of social sets to assess similarity of social status across members.

METHOD

The subjects were 3-year-olds (23 boys, 24 girls) and 4-year-olds (31 boys, 19 girls) who were attending a university lab preschool. There were, respectively, 10, 12, 12, and 13 children enrolled in the four 3-year-old classrooms and 10, 12, 14, and 14 in the four 4-year-old classrooms. The 3-year-olds attended preschool 2 half-day sessions per week; and the 4-year-olds attended preschool 3-half-day sessions per week. Most of the children had been enrolled in their class for 6 months prior to data collection.

Behavioral observations were collected during free-play in each class. A sequential time-sampling technique was used. During each 10-second interval names of all other children the target interacted with were recorded. Interaction was defined as engaging in one of the following behaviors: verbal exchange, attempts to communicate, engaged listening, involvement in joint activities, or physical interaction. On average, each 3-year-old was observed for 18.5 minutes and each 4-year-old for 28.5 minutes over an 8 week period. Average level of observer agreement on interaction was .85.

RESULTS

In a previous study McQuitty's (1957) elementary linkage analysis was used to identify social sets as meaningful units of social organization in preschool classes (Vespo & Park, 1987). In Figures 1 and 2 social sets are shown within the boxes with primary and secondary links shown as indicated in the figure key. These links represent the two highest interaction scores for each child. Thus, social sets represent children who interact frequently with each other relative to other children in the class. Classes A, B, C, and D are 3-year-old classes and E, F, G, and H are 4-year-old classes.

For the present study, the social status of each child and the similarity of status across members of a social set were examined. The proportion of intervals each child interacted with each target was computed. Next, for each target, the average of these proportions was computed. This score represents how often the class members interact with each particular child. (Proportions were transformed using the square root transformation, which is appropriate for small proportions (Alder & Roessler, 1972)). Each score was converted to a z-score and social status was defined as: popular, $\underline{z} > 1$; average, $-1 \leq \underline{z} \leq 1$; and unpopular, $\underline{z} < -1$ (Ladd, 1983).

Thirty-nine percent of 3-year-olds' and 47% of 4-year-olds' social sets consisted of same status children. (see Tables 1 and 2) Of mixed status sets, 64% of the 3-year-olds' and 83.3% of the 4-year-olds' consisted of similar status peers (only one member differed from the rest, by only one social status level).

Only 21.2% of the social sets consisted of highly discrepant peers. Also, only 9.1% of the social sets were uniquely low status subsystems. In fact, 76.5% of the unpopular children were in social sets with higher status peers. Further, a 2 (age) by 2 (gender) ANOVA on the percent of partners having the same social status as the target revealed a trend for increasing similarity with age ($F(1, 93) = 2.47$, $p. = .115$) (percentages were transformed using the arc sin transformation (Alder & Roessler, 1972).

DISCUSSION

This preliminary report indicates that subsystems of similar status children begin to emerge in preschool. Thus, within the peer group, children begin to be exposed to different socialization experiences at an early age. However, very few subsystems of unpopular children were found. Many unpopular children seem to be involved with higher status peers. Thus, at least at this eanly age, many unpopular children may be exposed to socially competent peers. Interaction with these peers may provide an important learning environment for the less competent child. Intervention strategies may be designed to take advantage of these natural learning environments.

Reports indicate that the stability of the social status of individuals within groups increases with age (Hartup, 1983). Stability of membership within social sets is not known. However, Putallaz & Wasserman (1989) reported an increase in the stability of groups from the first to the fifth grade. Our previous study showed that from 3 to 4 years of age there is an increase in the cohesiveness of social sets (Vespo & Park, 1987). This indicates that by late preschool social sets become more consolidated. In addition, in the present study, we found that similarity of social status within social sets increases with age. Taken together, these findings indicate that the peer environment becomes less flexible with age. The unpopular child is at increasing risk for becoming isolated from higher status peers.

The dynamics of social sets needs to be studied further.

Longitudinal studies are needed to determine the antecedents of the diverging developmental paths of less competent children who "rise up" or "sink" within the peer group. Such studies hold important implications for intervention programs. Late preschool may be a critical time for interventions which take into account the social milieu of the child.

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Social Sets and Social Status in Preschool Classrooms

Table 1
The z-scores and Social Status of Children in Each Social Set, 3-Year-Olds

Class	Social Set	Members and Status
A	1	Barbara(.69A), Katie(.82A), Alison(.78A)**
	2	Todd(-1.72U), Dylan(-1.05U)**
	3	Greg(1.11P), Anthony(.31A), Sam (-1.05U)
	4	Mark(-.60A), Larry(.28A)**
	5	Charles(1.42P), Steven(.63A)*
B	1	Peter(.25A), Michael(.07A)**
	2	Joshua(2.28P), Keith(.40A), Bruce(.26A)*
	3	Carol(-1.40P), Susan(-.65A)*
	4	George(.60A), Danny(1.05P), Tom(-1.08U), Melissa(.02A), Linda(-.56A)
C	1	Betsy(-.75A), Andrea(.53A), Albert(-.65A) Kristen(-1.31U)*
	2	Nicole(.72A), Cliff(.91A)**
	3	Della(1.16P), Margaret(-1.64U)
	4	Erica(-.70A), Amy(.13A)**
D	1	Julie(1.49P), Cathy(.14A), Beth(-1.73U)
	2	Samantha(-1.20U), Monica(-.10A), Erin(.06A)*
	3	Patricia(-.90A), Theresa(-.31A)**
	4	Brett(.57A), William(1.51P), Perry(-.94A)*
	5	Ivy(.18A), Adam(1.12P)*

KEY
P = Popular, $z > 1$
A = Average, $-1 \leq z \leq 1$
U = Unpopular, $z < -1$

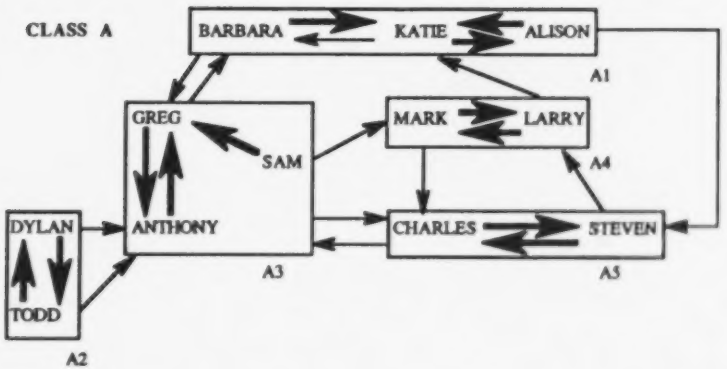
** Social set consists of same status children
* Social set consists of similar status children

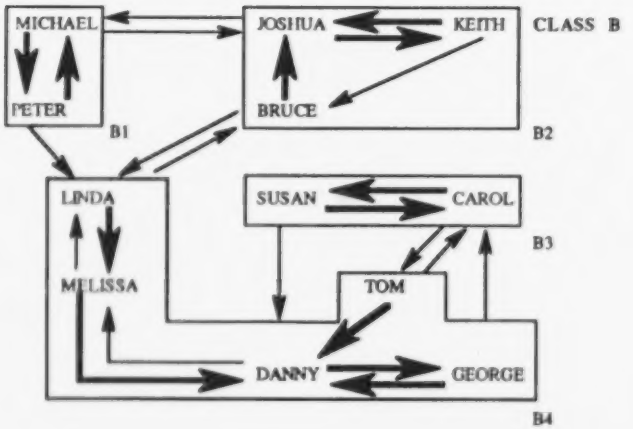
Table 2
The z-scores and Social Status of Children in Each Social Set, 4-Year-Olds

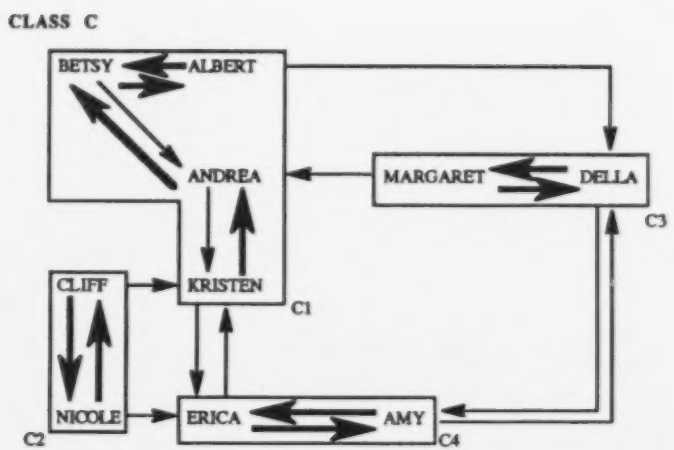
Class	Social Set	Members and Social Status
E	1	Robert(.47A), Edward(.75A)**
	2	Alan(.36A), Richard(.53A), David(-.06A), Andrew(.75A)**
	3	Mary Anne(1.04P), Janet(.21A), Elizabeth(-.92A), Diane(-2.53U)
F	1	Paul(-.20A), Kevin(.14A)**
	2	Eric(-.82A), Jon(-2.00U), Gary(2.62P), Jay(-.31A)
	3	Jennifer(.31A), Jill(-.18A)**
	4	Bill(.11A), Scott(-.12A), Laurie(-.45A), Pam(-.10A), Joseph(.47A), Matt(.61A)**
G	1	Frank(.94A), Craig(1.15P), Helen(-1.82U), Nicholas(-1.48U)
	2	Ingrid(.08A), Lisa(.23A), Marie(.29A), Fred(-1.03U), Tim(-.77A)*
	3	Harry(1.22P), Carl(.75A), Christopher(-.22A)*
H	1	Alexander(.67A), John(.03A), Maxwell(.27A)**
	2	Olivia(-1.87U), Alicia(-.40A)*
	3	Jacqueline(.00A), Gail(.77A), Kimberly(.27A)**
	4	Jason(.23A), Louis(-1.80U), Elliot(-.13A)*
	5	Ricky(-.33A), Francine(-.57A), Dawn(1.93P)*

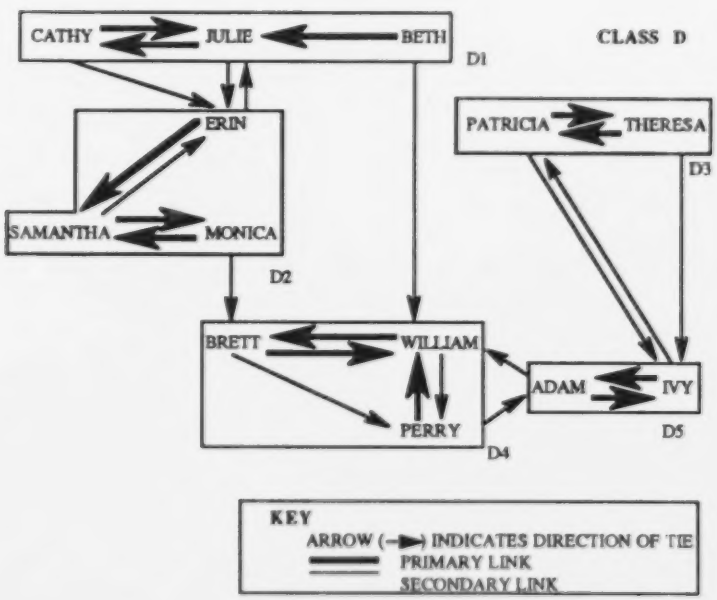
Key
P = Popular, $z > 1$
A = Average, $-1 \leq z \leq 1$
U = Unpopular, $z < -1$

**Social set consists of same status children
*Social set consists of similar status children

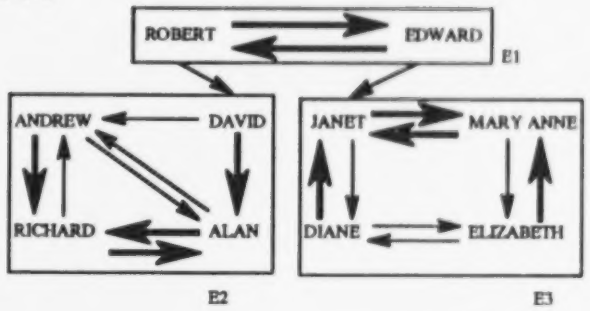

CLASS A
BARBARA
KATIE
ALISON
A1
GREG
SAM
MARK
LARRY
A4
DYLAN
ANTHONY
CHARLES
STEVEN
TODD
A3
A5
A2


MICHAEL
JOSHUA
KEITH
CLASS B
PETER
BRUCE
B1
B2
LINDA
SUSAN
CAROL
B3
MELISSA
TOM
DANNY
GEORGE
B4


CLASS C
BETSY
ALBERT
ANDREA
MARGARET
DELLA
C3
CLIFF
KRISTEN
C1
NICOLE
ERICA
AMY
C2
C4


CATHY
JULIE
BETH
D1
CLASS D
ERIN
PATRICIA
THERESA
D3
SAMANTHA
MONICA
D2
BRETT
WILLIAM
ADAM
IVY
PERRY
D4
D5
KEY
ARROW (→) INDICATES DIRECTION OF TIE
PRIMARY LINK
SECONDARY LINK

CLASS E



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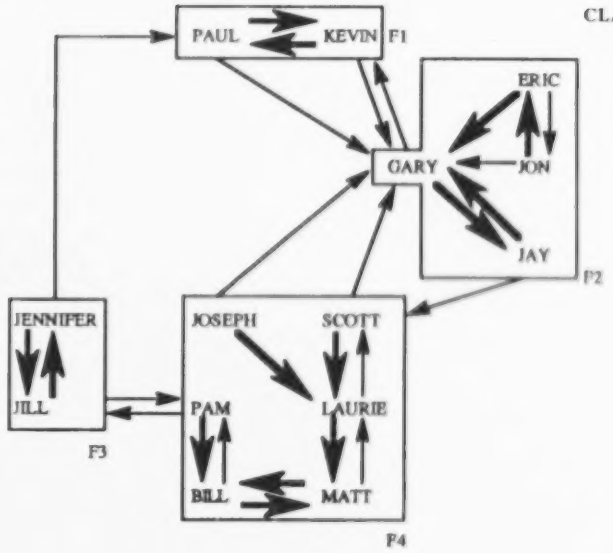

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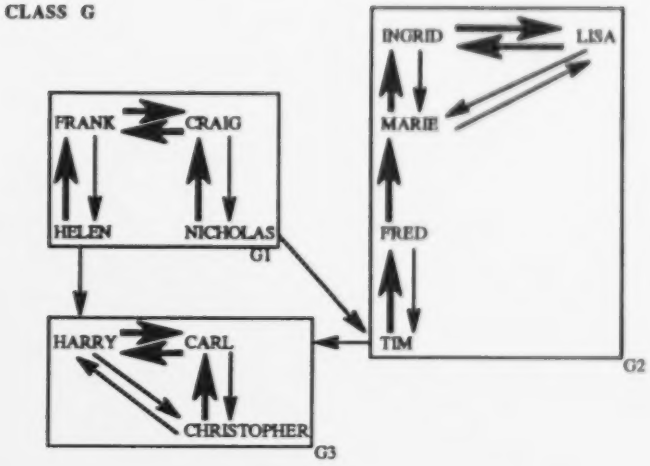

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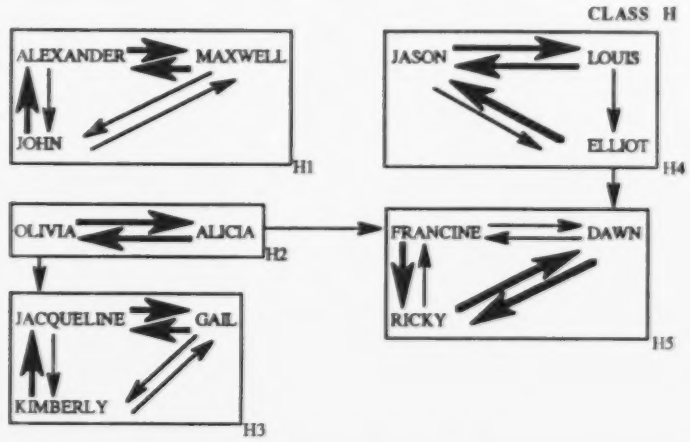

KEY

ARROW (→) INDICATES DIRECTION OF TIE

PRIMARY LINK

SECONDARY LINK